

Out Of Office

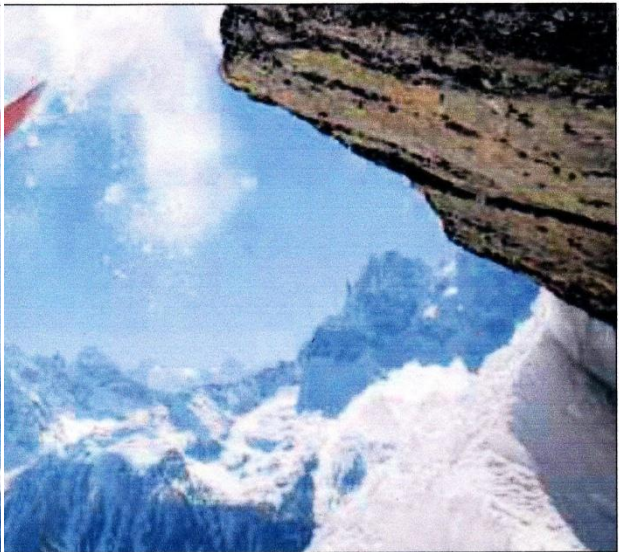
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Andermatt is one of the snowiest places in the Alps. Thanks to its position in the heart of the mountain range, the tiny Swiss resort gets huge, occasional storms from the south and smaller, more regular ones from the north

High times, low budget



Snow junkies: Like your mountains tall, steep and covered in powder? **FRASER WILKIN** suggests three weekend destinations to blow your mind, not your bank balance



Picture: Corbis

> Argentière

1,050-3,275m; pistes: 155km (including Chamonix)

The wow factor Chamonix may be known as the extreme skiing capital of the world but for speedy access to the best the valley can offer, the nearby village of Argentière is a much better base. If the piste map doesn't wow you, the views from the top of the 3,275m Grands Montets will. From here the possibilities for experts are mind-blowing. Few runs can match the glacial views of the Point de

Vue black and the bumps on Pylones beneath the top cable car are as relentless as they are unforgiving. But the real draw here is the off-piste – inconceivably vast, staggeringly beautiful and the inspiration behind many a ski movie, such as 1988 cult classic *The Blizzard Of Aahhhs*.

The pow factor The Chamonix valley is home to some of Europe's highest peaks, and the sheer scale of the mountains here

plays havoc with the weather – there are peculiar microclimates even at valley level. Despite being only 200m higher than Chamonix, Argentière gets much more snow, and little Le Tour (just up the valley beyond Argentière) is the snowiest village in France. No surprise, then, that Les Grands Montets (which comfortably exceeds 3,000m) is rarely short of powder and offers skiing well into May.

Nearest airport Geneva

Transfer time 1hr 15min

It's a deal Alpine Answers offers three-night packages to the three-star Hôtel Les Grand Montets from £460pp, including flights, transfers and breakfast.

Did you know? Local ski instructor Mark Jones set the world record for vertical endurance skiing here – 210,000ft vertical in one day.

> Andermatt

1,445-2,965m; pistes: 125km

The wow factor Hopelessly old-fashioned or refreshingly uncommercial? Whatever your take on Andermatt, there's no disputing little has changed since the first ski lift arrived in 1937. But with a mountain like the Gemsstock on your doorstep, who cares? This imposing peak has only one serious lift but, from the top, the possibilities are endless. The main draw is a steep north-facing bowl with a killer black of 900m vertical and countless off-piste alternatives that will keep even the most hardened skier amused for days. Get here quick, though; a huge luxury development planned for 2013 will change the face of this sleepy community forever.

The pow factor If it's fresh tracks you're after, this is the place to hedge your bets. Famously snowy Gemsstock is not only high (2,965m) but has a knack of catching storms from every direction. Take the winter of 2008/09, when a monster 14.5m of snow was clocked at the 2,100m mid-station. No wonder Andermatt is deemed the powder capital of the Alps.

Nearest airport Zurich

Transfer time 1hr 30min

It's a deal Ski Solutions (Tel: 020 7471 7777) offers four nights at the three-star Hotel Sonne from £495pp, including flights, transfers and breakfast.

Did you know? In 1459, peasant Kattryna Simon was sentenced to death for witchcraft. Her crime? Causing an avalanche.



> Engelberg

1,050-3,030m; pistes: 82km

The wow factor If it's high octane but hassle-free you're after, then Engelberg deserves serious consideration. Just 90 minutes south of Zurich, this unpretentious Swiss village is home to two of the finest off-piste runs in the Alps. The first, the Laub, is everything an off-piste run should be – long, wide and consistently (but not terrifyingly) steep. With its 1km vertical, there is nowhere better to hone your powder technique. The second route, the Galtberg, is very different but no less enjoyable, starting on the glacier and ending in the trees, a bus ride out of town. Take your pick. And if you're still standing by the time the lifts close, there's some decent après too.

The pow factor The village may be low but serious skiers will spend most of their day high above the valley floor, where the snow remains deep well into spring. The high point of the area is the 3,200m Titlis, a true snow magnet that collects more than 10m of the white stuff each winter, and the glacier stays open until June.

Nearest airport Zurich

Transfer time 1hr 30min

It's a deal IfyouSKI.com (Tel: 020 7471 7734) offers four-night stays at the three-star Hotel Centrale from £495pp, including flights, transfers and breakfast.

Did you know? Engelberg's infamous Yucatan bar is said to pour more pints in a season than any other Swiss resort.

